

2. Translating the Self

The actor, it appears, lives a profusion of roles in other people's eyes just as (according to Rousseau, in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*) social man lives in the opinion of others, and presents himself to those around him in a series of (dis)guises. Consequently, Rousseau, who distrusted both these public arenas of display and dissembling, while at the same time entertaining grave doubts about his ability to present himself to others in public as he felt and knew himself to be, turned to autobiography in order to retrieve a just image of himself from the many misconceptions which he believed that other people held about him. His gaucherie and inability to improvise a telling response in the course of general conversation made him unable to compose himself sufficiently in public in order to counter these misconceptions in person. Therefore writing an autobiography was for Rousseau the necessary substitute for the inadequacies and embarrassment of what he experienced in an interlocutory situation, a domain where he might recompose himself in retrospect. 'The role that I have taken of writing and of concealing myself is precisely that which suits me,' he claimed;¹ unlike speech, which seems always to obscure his intentions and imprison him within the confines of the character with which he is endowed by others, writing will permit him to 'render my soul transparent to the eyes of the reader' (*rendre mon âme transparente aux yeux du lecteur*).²

Like Rousseau, Diderot, in *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*, also alludes to moments of personal experience during which he found it impossible to represent his true feelings directly to a conversational partner. He, too, frequently portrays himself as undone by sensibility and unable to negotiate the pitfalls of conversation, as inept and absurd when declaring his love or hesitant and struck dumb when unexpectedly meeting a friend after a long absence, and contrasts this with the great actor's sureness in rising to the occasion of every role by a controlled dissociation of the personality, which enables private experience to be translated into effective stage presence. For, as in his celebrated account of Mlle Clairon's performance in Racine's *Britannicus*, Diderot maintains that the great actress can, while apparently in the grip of her performance, through emotional self-control, 'so hear and see herself, judge herself and the impression she'll create', thus making her in this instance at once 'little Clairon and great Agrippina' (*la petite Clairon et la grande Agrippine*).³

In some respects Diderot's account of the actor's art anticipates the kind of *dédoublment* of experience often noted by the writers of a later generation, like Strindberg and Maupassant, whose Naturalism frequently evoked a division of consciousness wherein the writer 'seems to have two souls, one of which records, explains and comments upon every sensation of its neighbour, the natural soul, common to all men'.⁴ What it certainly also does is to suggest an affinity between the role-playing of the actor and the divided consciousness of the autobiographer, seeing, hearing, and judging not only his past self but the effect his present narrative will have on its readers. Just as the autobiographer seems to possess a double consciousness of himself as he was in the unfolding sequence of his experiences and as he now is at the moment of recording them, so the actor can look on at the emotion he or she is producing on stage.

This in turn might well be linked to the idea of the actor or actress which emerged during the nineteenth century as someone essentially devoid of personality, as indeed a void or 'vacancy', the word used in Henry James's unjustly neglected novel *The Tragic Muse*, to describe the chameleon-like figure of the actress Miriam Rooth.⁵ 'What's rare in you,' Miriam is told by one of her admirers, Sherringham, 'is that you have – as I suspect, at least – no nature of your own... Your feigning may be honest, in the sense that your only feeling is your feigned one'.⁶ This is after he has concluded that 'the expression that came nearest to belonging to her... was the one that came nearest to being a blank – an air of inanity when she forgot herself, watching something'.⁷

In short, performers like Miriam are nothing in themselves, but merely who or what they pretend to be, a conclusion which the ultimately irremediably bourgeois Sherringham clearly finds disturbing:

It struck him abruptly that a woman whose only being was to 'make believe', to make believe that she had any and every being that you liked, that would serve a purpose, produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration – such a woman was a kind of monster, in whom of necessity there would be nothing left to like, because there would be nothing to take hold of.⁸

Like much else in his fiction, James's study of the actress clearly owes a great deal to a French tradition in which the arguments of Diderot's *Paradoxe*, though rarely mentioned by name, remain an evident point of reference. By 1890, when *The Tragic Muse* appeared, the idea of the actress as an impassive yet parasitically histrionic monster who preys upon the lives of those around her had become almost a commonplace. Edmond de Goncourt, for example, had deployed it in his anatomy of an actress, *La Faustin*, in 1882, by which time it had already been frequently exploited by Balzac in the *Comédie humaine*. If,

on the one hand, this notion was closely related to many other male images of *fin-de-siècle* woman, as depicted in Munch, Zola, Wedekind, Huysmans and Mallarmé, it also echoed received ideas about the essential characterlessness of the writer, who is sometimes portrayed (by Balzac, Strindberg, and James himself) as a vampire, preying upon others as well as upon his own intimate life. Like the actor, the writer has a capacity for assuming or dissembling or 'representing' emotion which seems often to be allied with a characteristic coldness, or *impassibilité*, and his incarnations, too, subvert the idea of a fixed, inviolable selfhood and the moral order with which such stability is almost invariably associated.

Nevertheless, James might also have found his portrait of Miriam Rooth endorsed by the comments of Janet Achurch (the first professional English Nora in *A Doll's House*), who was reported by William Archer in *Masks or Faces?* (his 1888 riposte to Diderot's *Paradoxe*) as saying:

It is impossible for me to help it. Everything that comes, or ever has come, into my own life, or under my observation, I find myself utilizing, and in scenes of real personal suffering I have had an under-consciousness of taking mental notes all the time. It is not a pleasant feeling.⁹

For it is, of course, Diderot who mounts a defence of what even the actress herself seems to have found dubious in her behaviour. Where Rousseau, in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* of 1758, had inveighed against the actor's art on the grounds that to counterfeit, be inconstant, and prey upon others was immoral, Diderot regarded the variety of the great actor, with his ability, like Proteus, to assume a multiplicity of guises, in a positive light. 'The great actor is everything and nothing' (le grand comédien est tout ou n'est rien), he affirmed, in *Le Paradoxe*, and again:

It's been said that actors have no character because playing them all makes them lose the one that nature gave them, and that they become false, just as doctors, surgeons and butchers grow hard. I think people have taken the cause for the effect, and that they're only fitted to play all characters because they haven't one of their own.¹⁰

Once again the similarity with the Keatsian paradox in which it is precisely a lack of identity which characterizes the writer is clear: 'The poetic character,' Keats wrote, 'has no self... Not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature'.¹¹ But in the context of autobiographical writing this, like Diderot's paradox, assumes a peculiar resonance, and may cast doubt on traditional notions of the genre. For if, in playing all his different roles, the actor is nevertheless consistently himself, his ability to assume a multiplicity of identities makes him an exemplary instance

of the *multiplicité du moi* which an autobiographer like Strindberg observes in himself and recognizes in others, and hence suggests a possible parallel between their respective role playing, and the paradoxical lack of identity which is often the final sum of the autobiographer's endeavours.

As Barret J. Mandel has observed, the major problems of autobiography as a genre usually arise from the unquestioned notion that a person's life is recoverable, that it is all somehow 'there' ready and waiting to be unearthed and transplanted.¹² Moreover, it is also presupposed that the discourse in which the life is written is not a part of the life being recounted but a transparent medium through which that life can be seen. However, as St Augustine pointed out at the time of the genre's inception, 'with regard to the past, when this is reported correctly what is brought out from the memory is not the events themselves (these are already past) but words conceived from the images of those events'.¹³ These words are thus a translation and, though the life to which they refer may seem anterior to and outside the language in which it is recounted, the autobiographer's identity is constituted in the words he writes, which designate what is absent.

Autobiographical writing therefore entails alienation as well as identification. 'Je' is always 'un autre' since the remembered self with whom the writer identifies in the present (with whom the continuity of a perfect translation is claimed) is also a 'he' (or 'she'), the 'third party' of Beckett's supposedly fictional narrators, whose appearances are always put in 'by other parties' elsewhere, and whose unending story is told by 'another'.¹⁴ Hence the paradox of the autobiographical narrator who is at once himself and yet not himself, continuous with his past and yet isolating that past in the act of writing about it, although like translation again, autobiographical discourse maintains the customary fiction of identity, of being a faithful rendering of a primary text.

It is, of course, Roland Barthes who drew attention to this dilemma in his essay 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?': 'When a narrator (of a written text) recounts what has happened to him,' Barthes remarked, 'the *I* who recounts is no longer the one that is recounted'.¹⁵ Moreover, even this recounting 'I', the seemingly stable discursive 'I' of the narrator who is telling the story now, is not the self who is writing to the present moment when this self is taken to be 'an interiority constituted previous to and outside language'.¹⁶ But from the perspective of autobiography the situation has perhaps been most acutely illuminated by Freud in his analysis of *Screen Memories*, where he elaborates upon the inevitable rupture between the acting and the recollecting self:

In the majority of significant and in other respects unimpeachable childhood scenes the subject sees himself in the recollection as a child, with the knowledge that this child is himself: he sees this child, however, as an observer from outside the scene would see him.... Now it is evident

that such a picture cannot be an exact repetition of the impression that was originally received. For the subject was then in the middle of the situation and was attending not to himself but to the external world.¹⁷

This is true of all writing, including even so immediate a transcription of experience into language as certain entries in the diaries of Anais Nin, where she sought the instantaneous capture of immediate experience ‘before it is altered, changed by distance or time’.¹⁸ But it clearly has a particular pathos in the case of autobiography, where the author claims to be the unique authority on the story he has to tell, and seeks to become his own progenitor. Confronted by the common patrimony of the language into which he is forced to translate himself, and which he inherits at birth, the autobiographer sometimes even speculates on the possibility of a means of utterance that is wholly his own – what Rousseau identified as the need for ‘a language as new as my project’ (*un langage aussi nouveau que mon projet*)¹⁹ if he was adequately to communicate his own singularity.

But as Roman Jakobson has pointed out, ‘In the realm of language, private property does not exist’ (*La propriété privé, dans le domaine du langage, ça n’existe pas*)²⁰. The language in which the autobiographer seeks to identify himself not only antecedes him; it is also held in common with other individuals as a shared circuit of exchange where he finds the available words already inhabited by the collectivity of speakers, of which he is only a single voice. Moreover, if the language at the autobiographer’s disposal is embedded in the conventions of his time, beset by the contingent emphasis of the moment, and permeated by the social and intellectual inferences of the age, it is exactly through this continual search for self-definition that he seems to vanish into the text of which he is nominally the master, where he becomes not transparent, as Rousseau wished, but a property of the language into which he translates himself. Individual lived experience passes into language; it is mediated by the interrelationship between the signifiers, which stand in for the experience itself; they displace the past of the person they are nominally representing (and the notion of presence is ironically evoked by the faculty of language as representation, the fabrication of a copy that replaces the original); the empirical facts of the autobiographer’s life are transformed into artefacts; sequence is endowed with meaning and condensed into design; and the writer becomes what for the reader he must remain, a figure of the text. For it is through the language to which he commits himself that the reader discovers the writer’s identity; his self is actually formed under the eyes of the reader, in the latter’s interpreting consciousness. Moreover, this written self emerges out of what Hume, in his reflections on personal identity in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, terms the ‘perpetual flux and movement’ of an identity whose continuity we ‘feign’,²¹ and comprises a series of structuring choices

and narrative strategies through which that self is composed. Further, every word employed to recover the traces of this buried past is also (like the tale which Alrik Lundstedt learns to tell about his past in Strindberg's novella, 'The Romantic Sexton on Rånö') a matter of covering them over again with words. It is an essentially formal rather than substantial identity, and, as Hume observed, 'all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity... are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties'.²²

The autobiographer is therefore confined to a life in language, according to criteria which are often sustained by the conventions of the alternative, dominant literary genre, the novel, where language is also employed to fabricate character and narrative likewise condenses a life into a destiny. As Lacan writes, of the analogous discourse of the patient in analysis: by recounting a past event

he has made it pass into the *verbe*, or more precisely, into the *epos* by which he brings back into present time the origins of his own person. He creates a kind of exemplary fiction, told by the imaginary self in order to defend its illusory sense of autonomy. And he does so in a language which allows his discourse to be understood by his contemporaries, and which furthermore presupposes their present discourse.²³

But the origin of an autobiography is not the remote past which the autobiographer normally proceeds to investigate, and which conventionally forms the opening chapter of his story, but its end, namely the act of writing itself. As Mandel, again, writes: 'We experience our memories only in the present; it is the present moment which allows the past to exist for us,'²⁴ and as in the case of *The Son of a Servant*, the impulse to write an autobiography is frequently a response to present pressures rather than the allure of the past. Indeed, while it appears by definition to be concerned with the past, autobiography is in fact determined by the present, as a response to the moment in which it is written, and which is often everywhere present in the writing of a work that is its own conclusion. Hence it is tied to the vantage point from which the text of the past is being translated into the language of the present – the writer's past is in fact rooted in the present of its recall. It represents the writer's attempt to elucidate his present just as much as his past, even though a common strategy is for the autobiographer to write of himself as if he were dead. Thus Sartre sees his autobiography *Les mots* (*Words*) as his obituary, Hume calls his memoir 'this funeral oration of myself', and Darwin explains, in the preface to the autobiography he wrote for his family in 1876, how he had 'attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life,'²⁵ while Strindberg also insists that his autobiographical fictions were written 'in the face of death' [inför döden, SV 20, 376]. Nevertheless, the autobiographer creates his past

rather than merely remembers it in the present, and in that respect his account is not something other than his life, not simply a secondary text into which he translates the primary text of his life, but an integral part of the life he is living and currently recording.

The problems raised by the medium in which the autobiographer seeks, like Rousseau, to convey 'moi, moi seul'²⁶ are compounded by the recurring identifications, both literary and ideological, in the light of which he monitors and organizes his experience. For, as a genre, autobiography expresses what Hayden White has called 'the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity,'²⁷ and alongside the translation of the self into the general circuit of linguistic exchange, it is the teleology of narrative, which posits identity where there may be at best only a random contiguity, that endows the life of its subject with what Strindberg (in *Fairhaven and Foulstrand*, 1902) calls 'a sequence [or consequence] and order' [SV 50, 154]. It is in the generally chronological process of autobiographical story-telling, where a temporal sequence is elevated into a causal one through the seemingly continuous and uninterrupted enchainment of the text in which the writer inscribes himself, that the autobiographer shapes his life and overcomes the contingency and evanescence of experience. The latter, following what Hume calls the inveterate human predilection 'to suppose ourselves possessed of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives,'²⁸ takes on the attributes of a plot which confers a line of intention and a portent of design upon the data it is processing, and thus holds out the promise of a progress towards meaning.²⁹ For the very act of narrating confers direction on the material which the text enchains, and allows the subject to place him or herself in the continuity of a story. Thus Ivar Lo-Johansson records the transition, at around the age of six or seven, from a time when memories were not yet enchainned, and the past had not yet become a narrative composition, to a more consciously structured existence when he 'began with the help of memory like a kind of set of building bricks to form a whole out of more significant events that I had not previously bothered about... I consciously "composed" [författade] people and events and made a kind of poetry or sketches of them'.³⁰

Moreover, the translation of the subject into narrative is itself part of the interpretative process, and is conducted according to the codes and conventions which allow the autobiographer to make his singular experience intelligible to his readers. These obviously entail what Georg Misch, in his *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, calls 'the different forms which the different periods provide the individual for his self-revelation and self-portrayal,'³¹ and which, for a nineteenth-century writer like Strindberg, would include the discourses of the *Bildungsroman*, the *roman intime*, the case history, journal

and confession. But they also encompass numerous more diffuse models, which in Strindberg's case include the structures of thought and feeling offered by what, in *The Son of a Servant*, he calls the 'quartet of Romanticism, Pietism, Realism and Naturalism' which prevented him from 'becoming anything but a patchwork' [SV 20, 72], the family romance of the patriarchal family, the constellation of the recurring image of himself in Biblical terms as 'the son of a humble cottage – The Son of a Servant – Hagar's' [XIV, 144], and the metaphors for recuperating experience provided by (among others) both Kierkegaard and Swedenborg as well as the multitude of mythical, Biblical and historical identities – Ahasverus, Asmodeus, Christ, The Flying Dutchman, Hercules, Jacob, Job, Jonah, Joseph, Merlin, Napoleon, Robert le Diable and Satan – in which he perceives some aspect of his experience incarnated, and which he employs to shape the written record of himself. Identity, as Strindberg recognizes in a letter to the Norwegian writer Bjørnson, in which he inventories his own 'old rat's nest of a soul, where shreds of antique Christianity, scraps of pagan art worship, shavings of pessimism, and shards of general world weariness are all jumbled together' [IV, 144; 1, 139], is adapted from a plurality of texts and structured within and around the discourses available to it at any one moment in time. Hence it also entails an ability on the autobiographer's part of being able to read and interpret his self, of discovering and decoding the language in which he or she is written. For, as Strindberg suggests, in the Preface to *Miss Julie*, the self is a 'split and vacillating' mosaic of previous and present periods of culture, 'scraps from books and papers, pieces of [different] people, torn scraps of fine clothes that have become rags' [SV 27, 105], an identity composed, in short, from the discursive formations and determinacies of an often lacunary unconscious.

In recuperating this identity it is not the writer's life as a succession of natural events that possesses meaning but the interpreted series into which it has been translated. The life is therefore a text to be read, interpreted and hence re-written, and this extended transposition of lived experience into a written narrative brings with it a recognition that a life may be as much a work of fiction – of guiding narrative structures – as the novels from which these are often taken. Hence Strindberg's remark, in a letter to Torsten Hedlund: 'It has been a characteristic of my life to assume the form of novels, without my rightly being able to say why' [XI, 224; 2, 557], and his delighted recognition, in a world so insistently shaped and designed by his own needs and desires, of plots and scenarios already imprinted upon the otherwise inchoate multiplicity of events in which he was both actor and spectator. Like Madame Bovary or Don Quixote, the autobiographer lives the set of stories he or she inherits and invents; they all organize experience to provide a configuration of significance through which life can be viewed and offer an available corpus of

narratives whereby it can be interpreted and retrieved. In short, they allow the autobiographer to create himself. The autobiographer *is* his text, and as such constituted by the complex intertextuality of the discourses through which his identity is assembled.

Like a translation, therefore, an autobiography is always less, or other, than its original. Hence the dissatisfaction which many autobiographers, like Rousseau or Strindberg, seem to feel for the works which appear under their name, and which leads them to produce more than one account of a life which is, by definition, singular. Their repeated attempts upon their own lives, which suggest that no one version ever wholly accommodates the original, provide eloquent testimony to the fact that like a good translation, an autobiography may resemble its primary text but cannot reproduce it exactly. Indeed, an autobiography is always in one sense provisional, a prelude, since even when undertaken from a posthumous perspective, it does not include its author's death as an accomplished fact and an effective moment of closure, giving point even to a life cut off in mid career, as is generally the case with biography. Hence the manner in which autobiographical writing is often self-reflexive in a double sense: it is aware both of the self it is seeking to recover on the writer's behalf and of the terms of its own process. Indeed, many autobiographies reflect upon their own nature and provide a critique of the medium in which they are cast, although if they do raise doubts about the task in which the autobiographer is engaged, this often takes the form of a kind of *concessio* designed to validate his enterprise by recognizing its pitfalls and limitations. Thus, where the conventional notion of autobiography envisages its writer attaining 'a sense of perspective and integration' in a work that, as literature, 'achieves a satisfying wholeness,'³² the situation is more accurately reflected in Strindberg's interim account of his life in *The Son of a Servant*, which ends, not with the customary climax of an identity discovered and sealed in writing, but in the paradoxical recognition of his textual multiplicity, recoverable (if at all) in the totality of all his writing:

But the result, the summing-up, one asks. Where is the truth for which he sought? It lies here and there in the thousands of published pages, search them out, put them together and see if they can be summed up; see if they remain relevant for more than a year, five years. Consider whether they even have a chance of being relevant, when that demands recognition by a majority. And don't forget that the truth cannot be found, because like everything else it is in a state of constant becoming (utveckling) [SV 21, 215].

The autobiographer is condemned to the multiplicity of becoming rather than the singleness of being. His account resists the static dimension of singular definition that it may initially have been devised to satisfy, and raises the

possibility that the autobiographer will lose or rather, like Strindberg, disperse himself the more he multiplies that self in words. 'Making yourself all up again for the millionth time,' as one of the voices in Beckett's *That Time* expresses it.³³

However, while identity may be forever deferred in the play of the text, in mastering its inscription the writer-subject is somehow distinct from the chronology he calls his life while nevertheless adding to it, again in a double sense: what he writes supplements what he has lived and yet is an event in the life he is recounting. In this, as someone who is his own spectator, he resembles Diderot's actor, at once his own subject and object, the player and first audience of his many roles. Surrounded by all his numerous autobiographical texts, it is this that Strindberg has in mind when he tells Leopold Littmansson that he 'can see myself objectively, something the he-and-she asses and colts call my subjectivity, as if that were something bad' [X, 350; 2, 524]. So can the actor, which is why (like the autobiographer) he is at once morally suspect and dangerously creative. As Sherringham responds to Miriam's question 'And do you think I've no character?' – 'Delightful being, you've got a hundred!'.³⁴